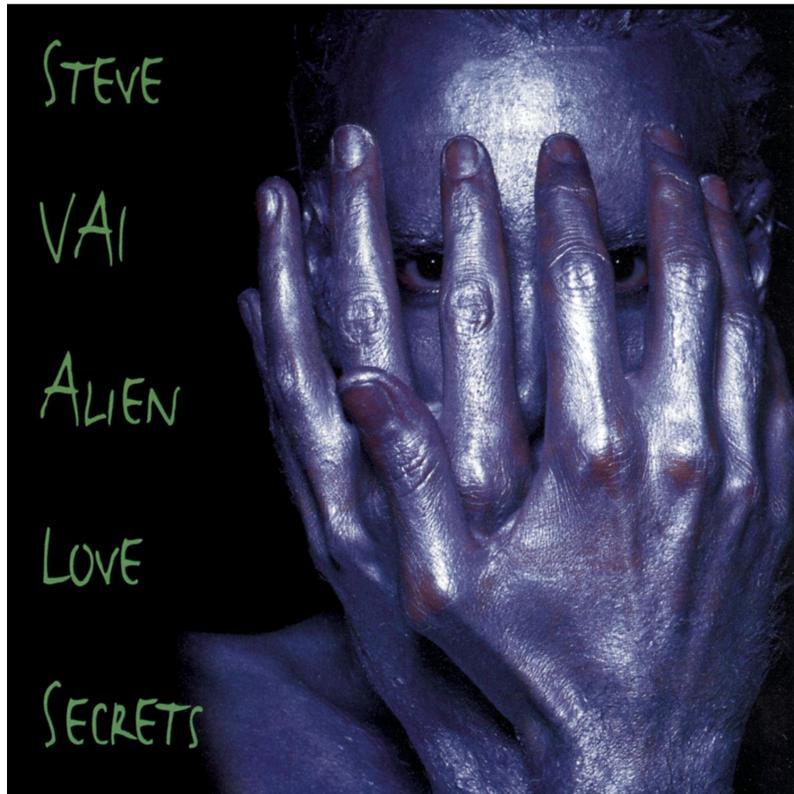


Alien Autopsy Pt. 2

I feel like I owe a lot of who I am as a musician today to an unusual source for a classical double bassist: guitarist Steve Vai. Everything about his musicianship inspired me as a young bassist. His intense work ethic (10 hour practice days!), his utterly fearless and unique voice, and his open discussions of spiritual topics set an incredibly high bar for an aspiring musician. His example continues to push me to this day. I had a VHS tape of a clinic/performance that he did at The Musician's Institute in the 80's that I played until it self-destructed. It has been said that you should never meet your idols. This may be anecdotally true in some circumstances, but when I had the chance to meet Steve after an LAPHil concert a few years ago it was everything my teenage self would have hoped it would be.



Vai wrote a series of articles many years ago called “Alien Love Secrets” that contained a set of different practice strategies and approaches for guitarists. One practice scenario in particular caught my imagination, and I still use it in my practice sessions to this day. It could be said to be the companion to the “drills” exercises that I proposed in an earlier article. To review, the purpose of “drills” is to segment a long practice session into 5 minute blocks of intense and specific focus. The idea is to isolate a specific technical concept and

examine it on a molecular level while continually shifting focus every 5 minutes to leverage the brain's penchant for novelty.

Vai's approach revolutionized both my concept of what it meant to focus and concentrate as well as what was possible to achieve during a practice session. On the surface, his first suggestion would seem very similar to the structure of the drills exercise: pick an isolated topic, and focus on it intensely for a pre-determined amount of time. This is where the similarity ends. The first exercise he proposed was to focus on vibrato, on one note, FOR AN HOUR. I distinctly remember the feeling of having the proverbial wind knocked out of me when I first read this. I felt like I was getting a window into a process that up until this point had been unknown to me. As with most things, he wasn't getting different results because he was doing something I was doing BETTER than I was doing it; he was getting different results because he was doing something DIFFERENT than I was doing. The focus, as he described it, was not to merely repeat the action until it became automatic (a common practice strategy), but it was to continually try new approaches and possibilities until everything known had been exhausted, and you started to search for new ways of approaching the task. Every angle was to be observed and explored: technical, expressive, musical, or purely sonic. This type of work may have more obvious applications if you are a soloist searching for your voice or a composer inventing new sounds, but it is equally usable in standard repertoire. Since the context of the music that we are performing might be defined (e.g. the style or period of the composer) we can use those guidelines to focus the work even further. Here is a "menu" with a few items that can be used to create a prompt for an incredibly deep practice session on the concept of "pick up notes".

A: 1. up bow to down bow
 2. down bow to up bow

B: 1. low note to high note
 2. high note to low note

C: 1. on one string
 2. on two strings

D: 1. with vibrato
 2. without vibrato

Just by combining these elements you can create 2^4 combinations. Even within these four parameters combinations there are infinite subsets. Are both notes at the same point of

contact with the bow, or is the first note closer to the fingerboard and the second closer to the bridge? What happens if you do the opposite? An example of a specific scenario might be the first 2 notes of the Recitatives from Beethoven's 9th symphony A1, B1, C2, D1. To reiterate, this is the epitome of mindfulness. Every repetition should be started with intent and the desire to experiment. If it becomes rote at any point, stop, note the time elapsed, and endeavor to increase your focused time by 10% in the next session.

The type of epiphany that I had when reading Vai's practice strategies highlights for me a crucial mindset for success in any field. Take note of your initial reaction when you are



exposed to something like this outside of your usual scope of understanding. If the idea of tackling this kind of work (either the amount or the intensity) is daunting or you feel resistant to it, don't worry. That's a perfectly "normal" reaction. However, if like me you react with wonder and an odd feeling of calm now that the seemingly veiled path to your artistic objectives has a "map" and a guide, I have no doubt that you will find what you seek. I can't wait for you to return from your journeys and blow all of our minds.



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With Love,

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